

ASSOCIATES TO DEVELOP DEMOCRATIC BURMA INC
EURO-BURMA OFFICE

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Maung San Win
General Secretary
Association of Arakan National Council Supporting Committee
Arakan Refugee Relief Committee
Arakan Refugee Children Education Center
Kuala Lumpur,
Malaysia

Dear Maung San Win,

Thank you for writing to ask me to clarify my involvement with the OIC and the Rohingya people. You are the first Burmese (Rakhine or Bama) to ask me this question directly. Most of the time, people make allegations without bothering to find out if there is any truth in what they suspect. The false stories are then spread on the internet and become ‘facts’.

First, let me state that neither I personally nor the Euro-Burma Office have received “millions of dollars” from the OIC. We have received no funds from any Muslim or Arab organization or nation. All our funds come from Sweden, Norway, Finland, Denmark, and the European Union. Our financial accounts are audited every year by an external internationally recognized agency and can be examined by those who wish to see them.

I am also not involved in assisting Rohingya organizations to have a dialogue with Minister U Aung Min of the Union Peace Negotiating Committee. Neither the Rohingya organizations nor U Aung Min have asked me to assist in this matter. We only work with ethnic armed groups that have requested our assistance.

Whoever is making these allegations is making me appear much more powerful and influential than I really am. I have nothing to do with the visit to Burma of the Turkish Foreign Minister. I became aware of the \$50 million Saudi aid only after it was announced. The Euro-Burma Office is just one of hundreds of international NGOs working on Burma issues.

I first became aware of the Rohingya question in 1978 when Operation Naga Min drove out hundreds of thousands from Rakhine into Bangladesh. This was when the United Nations intervened to establish the fact that the refugees were indeed from Myanmar. This was also when the word ‘Rohingya’ entered the international vocabulary to describe Rakhine Muslims.

The issue arose again when more people were driven out from Rakhine in 1991 (Operation Pyi Thaya). Based on human rights and democratic principles, I drafted a statement for the exile National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma calling for the rights of the Rohingya to

be respected. This drew criticism from Rakhine nationalists and the Burmese democracy movement who were fighting for their own democratic and human rights.

The reason for the criticism was that I had used the word “Rohingya” to describe refugees from Rakhine. I was told that no such people existed in spite of the fact that many were now stranded in Bangladesh. I tried to reason with my critics that they cannot prevent anyone from using the word “Rohingya” to describe themselves just because they did not agree with its usage. It is a basic human right to choose one’s own name. I also said that, whether or not they are citizens, Rohingyas cannot be ill-treated, discriminated against or abused.

In 1997, the Euro-Burma Office was established to promote democracy and human rights, and to help the people of Burma prepare for a transition to democracy. To achieve this, the National Reconciliation Programme was set up. Rohingyas were invited to attend meetings with other Burmese democracy advocates. This had nothing to do with recognizing the Rohingya as ethnic or indigenous people. We believed that a dialogue between all stakeholders in Burma – Bama, non-Bama, nationals, foreigners, Buddhist, Muslim, Christian, etc. – might pave the way for a better understanding in the future. But we failed because some Rakhine nationalist leaders would walk out if Rohingyas were present.

I understand that one of the reasons for this attitude is that while Rohingyas are a persecuted minority in Myanmar, many Rakhine themselves feel extremely vulnerable. Some Rakhine communities are tiny minorities in their own land within larger Muslim communities. They are threatened by the overwhelming presence in their midst of a different culture and religion. I also understand that many Rakhine nationalists feel that it was bad enough to have the Bama king conquer Rakhine and subjugate its people in 1784. They now feel that their identity and survival as a people are under a double threat. I know that claims by some Rohingya historians that the Rakhine kingdom was actually a Muslim state especially infuriates the Rakhines. Moves by other Rohingyas to claim that they are ethnic nationalities or indigenous peoples like the Mon, Karen and Shan also ring alarm bells. The Rakhine see this as a precursor to dividing their Rakhine homeland into two - a Buddhist state and a Muslim state. Previous government policies of creating special self-administrative regions give credence to such fears. I personally do not agree to such divisions.

Rohingyas, for their part, feel extremely rejected by consecutive governments that have taken away their most basic rights; by the democracy movement that has completely ignored their plight; and by the ethnic nationalities that do not dare to accept them for fear of a Rakhine backlash. The international community has done no better, keeping Rohingyas in limbo in refugee camps and only paying attention when rumours circulate that some Rohingyas have joined the Al Qaida movement. Conditions were made worse in 1982 when General Ne Win adopted new citizenship laws which effectively made most Rohingyas stateless.

Given these long unaddressed, deep-seated, complex and sensitive issues, the Euro-Burma Office sponsored the following activities to try and seek a solution:

- An Arakan History Workshop in Thailand in November 2006, to seek common ground with Rakhine organizations in the democracy movement. The objective of the workshop was not achieved as some Rakhine organizations chose not to attend.
- The 1st Rohingya Consultation in Bangkok in November 2006, to get a consensus amongst Rohingya organizations to agree to seek a political solution; to agree to an indivisible “Rakhine State”; and to work with Rakhines in the democracy movement.
- A Rohingya Convention in Bangladesh in May 2008, to unite Rohingya organizations to work for a common goal to seek a political solution and Burmese citizenship.
- A Rohingya meeting in Saudi Arabia in June 2010, co-hosted by the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC). This brought together three Rohingya political groups who agreed to work for a political solution through peaceful means. The Euro-Burma Office paid for the airfares of the Rohingya leaders and the OIC paid for their hotel accommodation and meals. EBO did not receive any funding from the OIC or any Muslim organization or nation.
- A Rohingya Convention in Saudi Arabia in May 2011 co-hosted by the Organization of the Islamic Conference. The outcome was the Arakan Rohingya Union (ARU) uniting 25 Rohingya organizations worldwide to work through peaceful means with the OIC to seek a political solution to the Rohingya problem, i.e. better conditions in refugee camps in various countries and eventually Burmese citizenship (see attached). Once again, the Euro-Burma Office paid for the airfares of the Rohingya leaders and the OIC provided the meeting venue, paid for their hotel accommodation and meals. EBO did not receive any funding from the OIC or any Muslim organization or nation.

The first photo you attached is taken at a lunch provided by the OIC for the Rohingya Convention where the ARU was formed. The second photo is of Mr Talal from the OIC and myself signing the ARU Agreement as witnesses. There was nothing secret about these meetings. The agreement and photos were widely distributed at that time.

The Euro-Burma Office is continuing to work with Rohingya and Muslim organizations in Myanmar, as well as with international institutions like the OIC and Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, to seek a peaceful resolution to the Rohingya question. We have adopted the following position regarding Rohingyas:

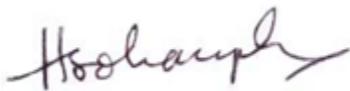
1. Human rights are universal. Rohingyas as human beings should not be discriminated against, abused or oppressed for their ethnicity or religion. This has nothing to do with whether or not they are citizens or foreigners.
2. The Rohingyas, like all humans, should be able to call themselves by any name they like.
3. The Government of Myanmar must address the issue of the citizenship of Rohingyas. The 1982 Citizenship Law should be reviewed. All Burmese citizens should enjoy full and equal rights without being discriminated against for their religion or ethnicity.

4. All minorities in society must be protected by law. Racial discrimination must not be tolerated at any level.
5. Illegal criminal activities such as rape and murder should be dealt with separately as legal matters with due process.
6. Illegal migration from Bangladesh should be dealt with as a separate issue. Bribery and corruption of officials must be seriously dealt with on all borders.
7. Whether or not Rohingyas are a Muslim minority, an ethnic nationality or indigenous, the existing State of Rakhine should not be arbitrarily divided. Instead of sub-dividing Rakhine and other states, the principle of democratic self-government for townships and village tracts should be explored.

For your information, the Associates to Develop Democratic Burma has been working to promote democracy in Burma since 1988. From 1997, the Euro-Burma Office started working with Burmese democracy organizations to prepare for a transition to democracy. We started the National Reconciliation Programme in 1999 to ensure that no one was left out in the pursuit of democracy. All groups were encouraged and assisted to seek peaceful political solutions. Promoting a Tripartite Dialogue – military, democracy advocates, and ethnic nationalities – to seek political solutions, became one of our key positions. Since then, we have been working closely with all ethnic nationality organizations including political parties that took part in the 2010 elections. Our current strategy is to promote democratic institutions within the current political set up in Burma to ensure that we can sustain a democratic transition.

I trust this letter answers your questions. Should you require further clarification on any matter, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Once again I would like to express my appreciation for the fact that you contacted me directly with your concerns.



Harn Yawng Hwe
Executive Director

Copies:

UN Office of the Secretary-General & Agencies
ASEAN Secretariat & Governments
OIC Secretariat & Member States
Ethnic Nationalities Council
United Nationalities Federal Council
Arakan Rohingya Union
National Political Parties in Myanmar